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ABSTRACT

Using the tools of systematic grammar, this case study examined 3- and 4-year-old children's experiences with storytelling and the potential effects of those experiences on the children's future success in learning to read. Subjects were students attending one of two nursery school classes held at a large primary school on the south coast of England. These children came from families experiencing financial, social, and physical problems. Results indicated that: (1) storytelling helped to gain the students' attention; (2) throughout the school year, the children began to move toward more explicit, individual self-expression and away from dependence on shared observations; (3) some children had substantial gains in learning language styles very different from those found in their prior conversational experience; (4) in October, only 21 percent of teacher-child dialogic interactions were initiated by students, but by May, this number had increased to 54 percent; and (5) children experienced many positive gains, in various areas, from learning how to actively construct narratives. (JW)

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Interaction at storytime in the nursery classroom

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Abstract

This case study examines three and four year old children's encounters with stories in a nursery class in a problematic socio-cultural area and their implication for the children's future success in learning to read. Using the tools of systemic grammar, an analysis is made of the successive stories the children help one animal puppet tell another which shows the children's marked progress in development towards a mastery of written language on a number of linguistic indices. Analysis of the teacher's storytime shows this learning to be a social enterprise of a collaborative sort, where the teacher's role is crucial, inviting active participation in the construction of the story's meaning, while communicating a hospitality to the children's non-standard vernacular, thus enabling them to "take possession" of many of the forms and meanings of the language of the written word.

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Introduction

Children not from the dominant culture approach their formal school initiation into literacy less well prepared, and learn to read more slowly and less effectively than do those from the dominant culture. A significant part of this 'cultural pre-disposition' concerns familiarity with the language of the written word. Yet the nursery class can give children not from the dominant culture a powerful introduction to narrative. In this paper I document one such "success story" and extract from it what seem to be the key principles that determine this success and might help others achieve something similar.

The study concerns three and four year olds attending the morning session of one of two nursery classes attached to a large primary school on a bleak council estate on the edge of a town on the south coast of England. The children come from families beset by many problems - financial, social and physical. Unsurprisingly, when they arrive in the nursery class in September, they appear to have very little experience of books or the language of written narrative.

Yet by the end of the school year they have become attentive listeners and are capable of constructing their own narratives in lengthy monologues in which they show control over a number of linguistic and literary features. In this paper I set out something of what they have learned, and through an analysis of some of the teacher's story-times, show how this learning seems to have been achieved.

Spoken and written language

These children are not inexperienced users of spoken language: most of the them appear to listen to one another with a good measure of understanding and to sustain a topic over a number of turns. But with stories any more substantial than the briefest anecdote, they are markedly less competent - both as speakers and as listeners. Yet although their teacher, Mrs G, finds it hard to maintain their attention and achieve significant comprehension, they greet the regular class story time with signs of pleasure. As to story-telling, at the start of the school year, although eager, they have very little idea of how to do this, accompanying their turning of the picture book

pages with sets of loosely connected and highly inexplicit comments. Richard's retelling of Eric Carle's **Do You Want to Be my Friend?** runs as follows:

"Do you want to be my friend. And that and that and that and that and that and that and that and that and that. There's that and that and that and be my friend. And that and that and that and that."

Richard turns the pages as he talks, and points to the very graphic pictures, so his performance is not totally uncommunicative. But it is not a verbal narrative.

Taking command of written language

Something about the the children's performance as listeners can be learnt from their contributions at story-time, but many of them say little during the reading and volunteer nothing afterwards. Productive competence is not, of course, the same thing as receptive competence. But in receiving we can do all and more than we are capable of producing. So it was to their own story-tellings that I looked for an indication of the development of their familiarity with and possession of the language being read to these nursery children.

To provide the children with a perceptible social need to "read" a story, I introduced two puppets to the classroom, Charlie the cat and Bill the elephant. In the hands of a volunteer, Charlie would listen to Mrs G's story reading, while Bill had a snooze. Later Bill would wake up, eager to hear the story from Charlie. The fiction was readily accepted by the children, enabling me to make an extensive collection of their storytellings.

Changes in the children's storytellings

Over the period of a school year all the five children observed made significant moves towards explicitness, away from a dependence on shared observation of the pictures in front of us. This is shown by their falling use of exophoric reference and determiners and a drop in the tendency to omit the subject of their utterances. This move towards explicitness is accompanied by a shift towards greater detail, elaboration and complexity in what they say, shown in their lexis and syntax.

But what is perhaps most striking is the move they make towards constructing texts that stand as coherent unified wholes. Apart from Richard's minimally expressive monologues, the children's autumn storytellings take the form of conversations, chains of exchanges, most of which are initiated by me. However, as the year progresses, each storytelling develops the very different appearance of one large exchange, albeit still initiated by me. Whereas in the autumn the children seem to see the end of each brief exchange as the signal that they are free to lapse into silence or to initiate a new exchange on a related topic, as is legitimate in conversation, by the summer they all appear to recognise that the invitation to tell a story initiates an exchange that is not complete until a narrative has been presented in its entirety. There may be some conversational interaction between the initiation and the completion of the response, but this appears to be seen as a temporary diversion from the business of narrative construction, which must be returned to and completed. It is as if the children are developing a hierarchical sense of an ordering of discourse more powerful than the chaining of their conversations, and a notion of narrative that permits judgements of relevance and completeness, and allows the speaker (and implicitly the hearer) to use the whole to gloss the parts. Table 1 sets out a summary of all the formal features examined.

Only eight months after his first quite incoherent attempt at story-telling and needing no further prompting than my initial question, in June Richard produces a coherent monologue, 23 utterances long, telling the story of Goldilocks and the three bears. Unlike his October attempt, this is in the main highly explicit. Less densely informational than the printed narratives he has heard, it is nonetheless full and detailed.

As to his use of linguistic forms, while Richard makes some false starts, leaves some utterances incomplete and on occasion uses an immature word order, as in "She sat on first Daddy's chair," most of his utterances are well formed and formally complete. Some are complex, using co-ordination or subordination. Sometimes he attempts both at once "And they went upstairs and they said 'There she is, Goldilocks.'". His narrative contains no non-standard forms, apart from two uses of

"come"as past tense forms. And it coheres. In marked contrast to his totally exophoric use of reference in October, where the "that"s were incomprehensible to those unable to see what he was pointing to, here, twenty two of the twenty four referential items are endophoric, referring to places or people already mentioned, or to people about to be mentioned. He is confident with conjunctions too, making liberal use of "and" to bind the story into a whole. But reference and conjunction are not the only cohesive devices at his disposal. He makes extensive, if not totally assured use of the parallel structures which are such a strong feature of folk tales and fairy tales, and which give his telling a rhythm and a focus and thus particular salience to the discovery of Goldilocks. Between October and June Richard has gained a confident mastery of a variety of language very different from conversation.

How this learning has been achieved

Mrs G has certainly read aloud to Richard and his classmates - on a daily basis. Like the other adults in the nursery class, she sometimes reads to small groups, but these tend to be very unstable and it is unusual for the same children to sit right through a small group story-reading. But every day there is a set time for a whole class story, when all distractions are reduced to a minimum as all the children assemble in a wriggling mass on the mat. Everyone is expected to listen to the story - from start to finish. Mrs G does not simply deliver the text as printed in the book. She is not merely an animated version of a story tape.

An account of part of the May reading of **Fish is Fish** indicates something of her approach. The story-reading proceeds with much interruption from the children and considerable deviation from the printed text, most seemingly designed to make the narrative more comprehensible, immediate and compelling to the children as when Mrs G reads the text's "One morning the tadpole discovered that during the night he had grown two little legs" as "The tadpole found out that in the night he had grown two little legs! Fancy waking up in the morning, Lee, and finding that you'd grown two little legs". It carries on in this way, with Mrs G is not so much

delivering a monologue as playing a key role in a dialogue - albeit a dialogue of a rather unusual kind. There is a clear agenda - construction of a narrative - and Mrs G has little time or attention for those who try to deviate from it. Observations which might be relevant to the physical world dealt with in the story, but which don't advance the narrative are ignored. So Desmond, who has a keen interest in biological facts, receives no response to his comments about the fish showing his tail or the proximity of the butterflies. Mrs G thus sets up a strict boundary around her narrative and works hard to keep it secure. Comments that advance the narrative, such as Lee's tentative prediction "But the frog might push him back" are welcomed. But Mrs G doesn't say whether this is right or wrong. Instead she uses it as a working hypothesis which they can all put to the test. It is left to Sonia to comment later that Lee was right.

These children are taking an active part in what is essentially a collaborative process. A study of the patterning of story readings over the year shows this to be the fruit of careful teaching of a rather unobtrusive and unconventional sort. Throughout the year the storytelling remains essentially dialogic. At no point does Mrs G ever deliver more than four consecutive narrative utterances.

And these dialogic exchanges are by no means initiated solely by the teacher. In October the children initiate some 21%. Instead of reducing, this figure grows steadily throughout the year, until in May some 54% of the exchanges are initiated by the children. This pattern of adult/child exchange initiation is similar to that found by Wells to typify the adult-child exchanges in the homes of rapid language learners (Wells 1981). Far from being schooled into becoming passive responders, these children are developing as increasingly active participants in this dialogic story-telling. This is particularly marked in the patterning of the interruptions, which increase in number from 12 in October, half of which come from the children, to 37 in May, of which 36 are from the children. The children are interrupting more not less. Is it simply a case of growing disorder?

An examination of the ideational content of these dialogic story-tellings reveals that this is far from the case. The exchanges deal in a variety of commodities,

ranging from complete irrelevance, through management of the event, orientation to story-reading, the conventions of story-reading and the mental processes of making sense of a narrative, to the construction of narrative itself. Then there is a further category - the centrifugal, where elements from the narrative are picked up, but pursued for non-narrative ends. Over the year there is a steady increase in the proportion of exchanges directly concerned with the construction of narrative, while all the others decline. The interruptions may have increased, making the story-readings appear increasingly disordered, but story-time has become more sharply focused on the narrative.

In many cases this narrative-focused commodity remains constant over more than one exchange. In October it is Mrs G who ensures such continuity, but by May the children have joined her in this enterprise, resulting in strings of as many as 11 connected exchanges. It is not only contiguous exchanges that are linked together by topic: at the end of the May story-reading Lee refers back to the fish's rescue by the frog which he has accurately predicted 30 exchanges before. And of course the connections run deeper than this. Teacher and children are engaged in collaboratively constructing a narrative which has its own complex coherence. Far from engaging in the well intentioned but centrifugal enquiries of the type reported by Gregory (1992), this teacher is primarily concerned to make the **story** live in the minds of the listening children.

Teacher and children are engaging in a variety of discourse which has has many of the interpersonal features of conversation but much of the ideational quality of the printed narratives which Mrs G holds in her hands. Unlike many teachers of young children, Mrs G does not appear to be concerned to create a kind of classroom order that casts the children in the role of respondent, preferring to build in the classroom something more akin to the interpersonal patterning found in the homes of rapid language learners. Yet she has by no means abdicated the teacher's role. She has drawn clear ideational boundaries around story-time, but within these she encourages the children to initiate, not questions addressed to her as the possessor of privileged information, but observations and interpretations of what

they are both seeing and listening to. Above all she directs them into the text, both sharing with them her own processes of making narrative sense and encouraging them to engage in a similar enterprise. She has determined the agenda of this discourse , but Mrs G acts as collaborator, not director and arbiter. Thus she steers the children towards a new ideational coherence while permitting them to hang onto the familiar inter-personal coherence.

The teacher uses the familiar vehicle of conversation to introduce children to the unfamiliar forms and meanings of narrative. In so doing she gives them an experience of the substantial pleasure that comes from the active construction of narrative. If more nursery and reception teachers were to do this, fewer children new to stories would see them as alien and uninteresting. And then we should be in a better position to teach them to read.

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Table 1

Movement towards narrative language in terms of a range of narrative features

Feature	Sonia	Holly	Simon	Richard	Lee
A	+	0	+	+	+
B	+	0	-	0	-
C	+	0	0	0	0
D	+	0	+	+	+
E	+	+	0	+	+
F	+	+	0	+	+
G	+	0	+	+	+
H	+	+	+	0	-
J	0	+	+	+	0
K	+	+	0	0	0
L	+	0	0	+	+

\+ Marked positive change, consistent over all tellings
\- Negative change
0 No marked change

A Incidence of exophoric reference
B Incidence of exophoric determiners
C Incidence of omitted subject
D Incidence of elaborative adverbials
E Incidence of lexically modified noun phrases
F Incidence of incomplete sentence structures (SPCA)
G Incidence of clauses additional to main clauses
H Ratio of child to adult utterances
J Greatest number of consecutive utterances
K Incidence of adult questioning prompts after the start of the story
L Ratio of present to past tense forms

Extract from reading of Fish is Fish

*The words of the text are given on the right and the spoken words on the left, with braces indicating simultaneous speech. U C denotes an unidentified child and *** indecipherable speech.*

202	Teacher	One day he decides that {he'd -	One day he finally decided that
203	U C	{he	come what may, he too must see
	Teacher	like to get out of the water -	them. And so, with a mighty
204	U C	Darren come {down ******	whack of the tail, he jumped clear
	Teacher	{and go into the	out of the water onto the bank.
		world and see what he could	*Picture of grim looking minnow*
		see, to see whether he could	*jumping out of pond onto bank*
		see birds, and men and	*with water flowers behind*
		women and children.	
205	U C	And cows.	
206	Teacher	He {landed in the dry warm -	He landed in the dry warm grass
207	Christine	{Don't he?	and there he lay gasping for air,
	Teacher	grass, and there he {gasped -	unable to breathe or to move.
208	Christine	{Dry {******	"Help," he groaned feebly.
	Teacher	{and groaned 'cos a fish can't -	*Picture of minnow lying on his*
	Christine	{***************	*back on bank beside pond.*
	Teacher	live outside of water for very	
		long.	
209		He began to die.	
210		He started to shout "Help!"	
211	Lee	But the frog might push him	
		back.	
212	Teacher	D'you think he might?	
213		Let's find out and see.	
214		There {he is look!	
215	Desmond	{Oh!	

216	Teacher	Lying on his back!	
217	Desmond	He's showing he's, he's tail.	
218	Teacher	Luckily the frog who'd been hunting butterflies nearby saw him.	Luckily the frog who had been hunting butterflies nearby, saw him and with all his strength pushed him back into the pond.
219	Desmond	No, not near (him	
220	Teacher	(And had	*Picture of frog pushing minnow back into pond*
221	Sonia	(And Lee	
		was right .	
222	Teacher	Yes, Lee was right.	
223		And with all his strength, you know how when you're feeling very strong, with all his strength, he pushed the fish back into the pond.	